

City of San Diego
Office of Ethics and Integrity

Nash's 12 Questions

Ethics consultant Laura Nash, a Senior Lecturer on the faculty of Harvard Business School, where she concentrates on values and ethical influences in business leadership and corporate culture, offers 12 questions that can help an individual identify the responsibilities involved with moral choices.

- 1) *Have you identified the problem accurately?* Assemble the facts. (i.e. Determine how many employees will be effected by layoffs, how much the cleanup of toxic materials will cost, or how many people have been injured by faulty products.)
- 2) *How would you define the problem if you stood on other side of the fence?* This forces you to examine the problem from different angles, and encourages self-examination.
- 3) *How did this situation occur in the first place?* This question separates the symptoms from the disease. Firing an employee for unethical behavior is a temporary solution. Probe to discover the underlying cause.
- 4) *To whom and to what do you give your loyalties as a person or group and as a member to the organization?* The issue of ultimate loyalty can be wrestled with, however, can clarify the values operating in an ethical dilemma. Who do you owe your loyalty (work group? Family? Self? Organization?)?
- 5) *What is your intention in making this decision?* Take a close look at what your intention is.
- 6) *How does this intention compare with the likely results?* Probe the likely results. Honorable intentions do not guarantee positive results. Make sure that the outcomes reflect your motivations.
- 7) *Whom could your decision or action injure?* Try in advance, to determine harmful consequences. Too often, people consider possible injury only after being sued or prosecuted.
- 8) *Can you engage the affected parties in a discussion of the problem before you make your decision?* If it is possible, engage in a conversation with the affected parties to understand how your actions will affect them. Too often we push forward with projects while assuming that we know what is in the best interests of others.

- 9) *Are you confident that your position will be as valid for a long period as it seems now?* Make sure your choice will stand the test of time. Do not make a choice that will not be justifiable now and months from now.
- 10) *Could you disclose without qualm your decision or action to your boss, your colleagues, your family, or society as a whole?* If you or your group wouldn't want to disclose this action, then you'd better reevaluate your choice.
- 11) *What is the symbolic potential of your action if understood? Misunderstood?*
What you intend may not be what the public perceives. (I.e. If your organization is a notorious polluter, contributions to local arts groups may be seen as an attempt to divert attention from your firm's poor environmental record, not as a generous civic gesture).
- 12) *Under what conditions would you allow exceptions to your stand?* Moral consistency is critical, but is there any basis for making an exception? (I.e. Dorm rules might require that visiting hours end at midnight on weekdays. As a resident assistant, however, is there any time when you would be willing to overlook violations? During finals week? On an evening before classes start? When dorm residents and visitors are working on class projects?)¹

1 (Adapted from: Nash, L. (1981). *Ethics Without the Sermon*. Harvard Business Review, (59))